A way with words; guidelines and
appropriate terminology for the
portrayal of persons with
disabilities

OFFICE FOR DISABILITY ISSUES

A Way with Words

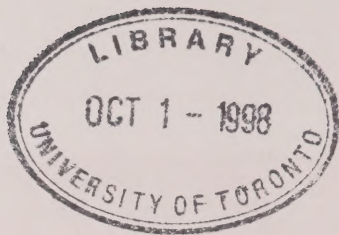Guidelines and appropriate terminology for the portrayal of persons with disabilities

A Way
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Produced by the:

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Human Resources Development Canada

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Ce guide est également disponible
en français sous le title Le pouvoir des mots

Introduction:

Language is a powerful and important tool in shaping ideas, perceptions, and ultimately, public attitudes.

Words are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier persons with disabilities must face in gaining full integration, acceptance and participation in society.

Careful presentation of information about persons with disabilities can help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones. The House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons found in its report *No News is Bad News* that vocabulary can create perception. Demeaning, belittling or negative words are a barrier to greater understanding and can trivialize genuine support given by a community to persons with disabilities.

Language use is changing as persons with disabilities claim their individual and collective right to participate fully in society.

Dated and disparaging words are being replaced with precise, descriptive terms which have specific meanings that are not interchangeable.

Persons with disabilities are asking, just as woman and minority groups are asking, that the media use respectful terms in writing about them or issues that affect their lives.

Individuals with disabilities are working to achieve equality, independence and full participation in our society. The ways in which issues are reported and the use of proper terminology can help persons with disabilities reach these goals.

Purpose:

This booklet suggests current and appropriate terminology to reflect the increased participation by Canadians with disabilities in our society. This booklet is intended to encourage and promote fair and accurate portrayal of persons with disabilities. It is primarily designed for print and broadcast media professionals writing and reporting about issues of concern to persons with disabilities.

Content:

This booklet has two sections and a removable insert. GENERAL GUIDELINES has information on terminology and portrayal of persons with disabilities.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
deals with reporting on the issues of concern to persons
with disabilities. The removable insert suggests
appropriate terminology.

General guidelines:

> ▶ It is important to remember that each word in
> today's terminology has a precise meaning and
> that the words are not interchangeable.

> ▶ "Disabled" and "handicapped" are not the same
> thing. A disability is a functional limitation or
> restriction of an individual's ability to perform an
> activity. A "handicap" is an environmental or
> attitudinal barrier that limits the opportunity for a
> person to participate fully. Negative attitudes or
> inaccessible entrances to buildings are examples
> of handicaps.

> ▶ The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun.
> People are not conditions. Do not use "the
> disabled"; use "persons with disabilities".

> ▶ Focus on the issue rather than the disability. If
> the disability is not relevant to the story, it is not
> necessary to report it.

► Try to avoid categorizing persons with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgemental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave", "courageous", "inspirational" or other similar words that are routinely used to describe a person with a disability.

Remember that the majority of persons with disabilities are average and typical of the rest of the population.

Similarly, references which cause discomfort, guilt, pity or insult, should be avoided. Words like "suffers from", "stricken with", "afflicted by", "patient", "disease" or "sick" suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.

► Avoid the use of words such as "burden", "incompetent", "defective", "special", etc. which suggest that persons with disabilities should be treated differently or be excluded from activities generally available in the community.

- ► Be particularly careful with terminology used in headlines. Remember that headlines make the first impression.

- ► Refer to technical aids in factual, non-emotional terms. Avoid prolonged focus on support equipment.

- ► Persons with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. Persons who use wheelchairs go for "walks", people with visual impairments "see" what you mean, etc. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner; however, that does not mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.

- ► Remember that although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, haemophilia, mental health, learning, or developmental disabilities also encounter negative attitudes and barriers.

Media coverage of persons with disabilities

Researching, Writing and Reporting

Too often, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line dominates, e.g., how the individual has overcome great odds.

There are few examples of in-depth coverage of issues of particular importance to persons with disabilities (e.g., lack of physical access to facilities, employment, poverty, etc.).

Persons with disabilities are seldom asked for their views on stories dealing with transportation, the environment, child care, etc.

The media can help create and reinforce positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Progress has been made in recent years and media professionals are asking advice on how to report on, discuss, and write about disability.

A Way with Words

Terminology guide concerning persons with disabilities

Do not use or say / Do use or say

Aged (The) / **Seniors (The)**
Adjectives like frail, senile or feeble suggest a negative image of seniors and should not be used

Birth defect
- congenital defect
- deformity

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY SINCE BIRTH, PERSON WHO HAS A CONGENITAL DISABILITY

Blind (The)
- visually impaired (The)

PERSON WHO IS BLIND, PERSON WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

Confined to a wheelchair
PERSON WHO USES A WHEELCHAIR, WHEELCHAIR USER for individuals with a mobility impairment, a wheelchair is a means to get around independently

Cripple
- crippled
- lame

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH ARTHRITIS, A SPINAL CORD INJURY, ETC

Do not use or say / Do use or say

Deaf (The)
PERSON WHO IS DEAF
When referring to the entire deaf population and their culture it is acceptable to use "the deaf"

Hard of hearing (The)
- hearing impaired (The)

PERSON WHO IS HARD OF HEARING
These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for a hearing loss with an amplification device or system

Epileptic (The)
PERSON WHO HAS EPILEPSY

Fit
- spell, attack

SEIZURE

Handicapped (The)
PERSON WITH A DISABILITY UNLESS REFERRING TO AN ENVIRONMENTAL OR ATTITUDINAL BARRIER
In such instances "person who is handicapped by" is appropriate

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Do not use or say / Do use or say

Insane
- lunatic
- maniac
- mental patient
- mentally diseased
- neurotic
- psycho
- psychotic
- schizophrenic
- unsound mind

PERSONS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS SCHIZOPHRENIA, PERSON WHO HAS DEPRESSION
It is important to remember that the development of appropriate terminology is still in progress; however, the above terms are currently in use. The term "insane" (unsound mind) should only be used in strictly legal sense. Obviously, words such as "crazy", "demented", "deviant", "loony", "mad", and "nuts" should be avoided

Invalid
PERSON WITH A DISABILITY
The literal sense of the word "invalid" is "not valid"

Do not use or say / Do use or say

Mentally retarded
- defective
- feeble minded
- idiot
- imbecile
- moron
- retarded
- simple
- mongoloid

PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL IMPAIRMENT
One can say, a person with Down's syndrome, only if relevant to the story

Normal
PERSON WHO IS NOT DISABLED
Normal is only acceptable in reference to statistics, e.g., "The norm"

Patient
PERSON WITH A DISABILITY
Unless the relationship being referred to is between a doctor and client

Physically challenged
- differently able

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

Spastic
PERSON WHO HAS SPASMS
Spastic should never be used as a noun

Suffers from
- afflicted by
- stricken with

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, ETC
Having a disability is not synonymous with suffering

Victim of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis arthritis, etc
PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS ARTHRITIS, ETC., PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH A MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT

Canada

Bridging the Communications Gap

Here are some suggestions to improve communications with persons with disabilities.

▶ When talking with a person with a disability speak directly to him/her rather than through a companion who may be there.

▶ Avoid putting persons with disabilities on a pedestal and using patronizing terms. Interview a person with a disability as you would any other person.

▶ Do not unnecessarily emphasize differences. Having a "one of them" versus a "one of us" attitude only serves to reinforce barriers.

▶ In visual treatments (e.g., television, photographs), do not dwell on technical aids or adaptive devices unless, of course, the purpose is to introduce or discuss a particular aid or device.

Following an interview, ask yourself:

▶ Am I writing this piece because it involves a person with a disability or because the issue and related circumstances are relevant to the general population? If it did not involve a person with a disability, would I still want to write it?

- ▶ Is a reference to a disability necessary to the story? If it is, am I using the correct terminology (e.g., "uses a wheelchair", and not "confined to a wheelchair")?

- ▶ Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?

Conclusion

Journalists can contribute to a more positive and accurate image of persons with disabilities. The information provided to the general public, and the ways in which this information is presented, often create a framework for the attitudes people have and the ways in which they interact with individuals with disabilities. If the coverage of disability-related issues is done in a non-emotional, factual and integrative manner, the public will no doubt begin to question the prejudices and stereotypes that still exist.

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Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities. Archalert, Volume 4, number 7.

No News is Bad News. Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons, House of Commons.

Portraying People with Disabilities. National Easter Seal Society (Chicago, Illinois).

"*Watch Your Language, Words Shape Attitudes*" Frances Strong (appeared in the *Rehabilitation Digest*, winter, 1989).

Word Choices. A lexicon of preferred terms for disability issues. Office for Disabled Persons, Government of Ontario.

Words with Dignity. Ontario March of Dimes.

Worthless or Wonderful: The Social Stereotyping of Persons with Disabilities. Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada.

Organizations Consulted

Canadian Association for Community Living
(CACL)
4700 Keele Street, Kinsmen Building
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3
(416) 661-9611

Canadian Association of the Deaf (CAD)
251 Bank Street, Suite 203
Ottawa, Ontario
K2P 1X3
(613) 565-2882

Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB)
396 Cooper Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario
K2P 2H7
(613) 567-0311

Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
(CHHA)
2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205
Ottawa, Ontario
K1V 7P2
VOICE (613) 526-1584,
TTY (613) 526-2692

Canadian Mental Health Association
(C.M.H.A.)
2160 Young Street
Toronto, Ontario
M4S 2Z3
(416) 484-7750

Canadian National Institute for the Blind
(CNIB)
1929 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M4G 3E8
(416) 486-2500

Canadian Paraplegic Association
(CPA)
1101 Prince of Wales Drive
Suite 320
Ottawa, Ontario
K2C 3W7
(613) 723-1033

Council of Canadians with Disabilities
(C.C.D.)
926-294 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3C 0B9
(204) 947-0303

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)
323 Chapel Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 7Z2
(613) 238-5721

People First of Canada
489 College Street, Suite 308
Toronto, Ontario
M6G 1A5
(416) 920-9530

National Educational Association of Disabled Students
(NEADS)
4th Level Unicentre
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
K1S 5B6
(613) 526-8008

One Voice, the Canadian Seniors Network
350 Sparks Street, Suite 1005
Ottawa, Ontario
K1R 7S8
(613) 238-7624

Society for Depression and
Manic-Depression of Manitoba
4-1000 Notre-Dame Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3E 0N3
(204) 786-0987

Schizophrenia Society of Canada
75 Donway W.,
Suite 814
Don Mills, Ontario
M3C 2F9
(416) 445-8204